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SUBJECT: MA'AN: POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC NEGLECT ON THE
DUSTY ROAD TO NOWHERE

REF: AMMAN 79

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: This cable is the first in an occasional series which will focus on regional political centers in Jordan. The southern Jordanian city of Ma'an, populated by tribal leaders of Bedouin East Bank origin, is considered a bellwether for regime stability. In the past twenty years, riots have cemented the city's reputation as a security problem and a center of religious conservatism. Municipal officials have few resources for local services and hope for increased central government aid. End Summary.

A Rough City

¶2. (SBU) Ma'an is a tribal city of 53,000 located in a barren desert three hours south of Amman. Once a fairly prosperous stop on the pilgrimage route to Mecca, the city has lost its status as a regional hub through a steady descent into poverty. Today it stands as a dusty truck stop on the desert highway between Aqaba and Amman -- a rough city with a reputation for smuggling and religious radicalism. Ma'an's history of violent protest causes many in Amman to see it as a bellwether for regime stability.

Tribal Dynamics

¶3. (SBU) Ma'an is a city of bedouin East Bankers. No single tribe dominates the region -- the population is divided fairly evenly between several smaller families which compete for political and social dominance. As a consequence, politics in Ma'an is cutthroat, with tight competition for political representation both at the local and national level. In recent years, tribal leaders have held informal "primaries" to help create consensus candidates for parliament and local positions. These often go through several rounds of voting, and the decision is not always unanimous -- some tribal notables refuse to accept defeat and split the vote by running against their own kin.

A History of Violence

¶4. (C) Ma'an has a long history of civil unrest and anti-government sentiment. During the past twenty years, riots have broken out in the city on a regular basis. In 1989, a rise in oil prices made it unprofitable for truckers to transport goods from Aqaba to Amman. When the truckers took to the streets, they were joined by the unemployed and residents who were simply tired of being ignored by the central government. Then Interior Minister Rajai Dajani responded harshly, justifying the use of force by claiming that Islamist radicals had stirred up the crowds. In 1996, the rising price of bread sparked another round of violent protests. In 2002, anti-government demonstrations once again centered on economic issues and the lack of state attention

to rural and bedouin interests. During the recent Gaza crisis, protesters in Ma'an fired guns in the air in the presence of Interior Ministry troops, prompting royal concern about the city's stability.

¶15. (C) Ma'an Mayor Khaled Al-Shamri, members of the city council, and local sheikhs all emphatically told poloff that Ma'an's reputation as a hotbed of discontent and radicalism was purely a function of the economy. Shamri insisted that the regular outbursts of popular rage were "economic, far from politics, far from religion." Contacts blamed the Amman-based media for focusing on a marginal group of known Islamists as the source of unrest rather than zeroing in on the poverty, unemployment, and general neglect that give Ma'anis few options to make their voices heard effectively.

Religious, Not Politically Religious

¶16. (C) Ma'an is by many appearances a religious town. Most women who venture out in public are swathed in black abayas. Many of the men have a prominent and permanent bruise on their forehead that signifies their devotion to prayer. Even so, contacts noted that the Muslim Brotherhood-linked Islamic Action Front (IAF), which holds six seats in Parliament, is not a powerful political force in Ma'an. "Everyone sympathizes with the political positions of the Islamists, but those sentiments rarely translate into concrete support at the ballot box," says Omar Shukur, head of the Ma'an city council. IAF members are completely absent from Ma'an's parliamentary delegation and local government, and have been for some time. Contacts chalked up the failure of the IAF to

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the intense competition between tribal interests, which dominate the political life of the city.

¶17. (C) While hesitant to talk about ongoing Islamist influence, contacts admitted that there was a recognized group of Islamist radicals in Ma'an but downplayed their influence and insisted that their appeal had greatly diminished in recent years. Carefully toeing the official line, local sheikhs asserted that there are "fewer than 100" radicals whose charitable activities are well-known to the citizens of Ma'an and security organs alike. The mayor of Ma'an also said that the state had developed a policy of co-opting troublesome Islamists by giving them government jobs. ("There's one outside if you want to meet him," he added.)

Government Neglect

¶18. (C) The Ma'an municipality has a meager budget of about 3.6 million dinars (five million dollars), most of which is spent on expensive infrastructure projects which leave little extra for local services. The municipality has long sought to start a recycling program, but has no money for start-up costs. Ma'an Mayor Khaled Al-Shamri said that financial support from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs (which allocates central government support for all municipalities in Jordan) is "not worth mentioning," leaving the city to depend only on its minute local tax base. He lauded the King for his stated interest in empowering municipalities but faulted officials in the government for failing to implement the King's vision for decentralization of central government authority.

Economic Woes

¶19. (SBU) Ma'an's small business community sees itself as caught between two areas of outsized government attention: the Aqaba Special Economic Zone and the touristic zone of Wadi Musa/Petra, which is run directly by the central government. According to Abdullah Salah, who heads the Ma'an

Chamber of Commerce and Industry, local businesses cannot compete for customers with their counterparts in Aqaba who enjoy lower taxes and no import duties on their goods. Rather than shop locally, Ma'an residents preferred to drive an hour south, where prices are lower and quality higher. Ma'an's base of qualified laborers is already low, but the higher wages of Wadi Musa and Aqaba make it even harder to retain quality personnel.

¶10. (SBU) In an effort to soothe local concerns and create a mechanism for attracting economic activity to the city, Ma'an was granted a special industrial zone in 2004. The zone offers tax holidays to businesses willing to set up shop in the city and employ local workers. Up to this point, however, the Ma'an zone has failed to attract a significant number of businesses. Employers, hesitant about the supply of qualified labor in Ma'an and generally unconvinced about its strategic advantages, continue to prefer Aqaba and similar zones in the northern part of Jordan which are nearer to significant sources of qualified labor. In addition, the global economic slowdown is starting to erase any chance of financing for new businesses in Ma'an. A 180 million dollar Qatari-German-Jordanian glass factory (the first large investment in the Ma'an industrial zone) was recently canceled due to lack of investment capital.

Comment

¶11. (C) While economic problems have traditionally proven to be the genesis of security problems in Ma'an, the root of those economic problems can be traced back to political neglect. Ma'an has few prominent tribal leaders, politicians, or advocates who operate on the national stage. As a consequence, the city often slips down the priority list and loses out in bureaucratic battles over resource allocation.

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